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**The Snail and the Good Government.
A critique of 'civil society' by the
Zapatista movement, Mexico**

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Abstract:

Civil society is generally conceived of as either supplementary or complementary to the state. While it is widely recognised that the boundaries between the state and civil society are often complex, blurred and negotiated (CCC, LSE), most notions of civil society rely on the separation of society from the state, presenting the former as a public space for free association. The re-emergence of autonomy as a central demand in many social movements across the world (which involve claims for self-determination, organisational self-management and independence vis-à-vis the state and capital) has opened a theoretical space to re-think civil society and the state in novel ways. Particularly interesting are in this regard autonomous practices which have been presented by movements as offering an alternative to social relations of capitalism.

This working paper argues that autonomous practices by social movements allow a critique of dominant notions of civil society, defined as a sphere established apart from, regulated via or complementary to the state. The praxis of substantive autonomy emerges and negates the divider between social, economic and political spheres typical of liberal societies. Through autonomy – a category of struggle, civil society ceases to be only the site where the legitimisation of capitalist hegemony occurs to become a *territorial and symbolic space* where the contention between hegemonic and counter hegemonic practices takes place. In this respect, the concept of 'civil society' is not an 'actualization of the classic term, but alludes to a mutation in the political body' (Esteva 1999).

The theoretical discussion is based on an illustrative case study of new political and juridical bodies (the 'Snails' and Good Government Council) operated by the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. It is shown that to the Zapatistas, the term civil society is inextricably interlocked with the practice of radical democracy and autonomy and it is described as 'the sphere of autonomously organised society, in opposition to that established by the state

or directly controlled by it or associated to it' (Esteva, 1999). Civil society is experienced as the 'sphere of autonomously organised society' which is able to empower itself in 'rising up' and activating 'the power it already has' (Esteva, 1999: 159). I explore the processes through which the Zapatistas challenge state power by practicing radical democracy. I suggest that despite its significance the Zapatistas' critique of the liberal concept of civil society has been overlooked and point at both the lessons the Zapatista experience of self-government presents for the re-configuration of the concept of civil society in political sociology and political science and the difficulties to grasp them

The paper is based on data from the author's research project 'Social movements and the project of autonomy in Latin America' (RES-155-25-0007) (2008) funded by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under the 'Non-Governmental Public Action' programme, centre for Civil Society, LSE. The project compared four social movements from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Mexico.

Keywords: autonomy, civil society, critique, social movements, Latin America, Zapatistas.

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Introduction

'In our dreams we have seen another world' (Subcommander Marcos, 1 March 1994)



Photo GGC, Oventic, Chiapas © 2008
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From the streets of the ancient Greek cities to the Mexican Lacandona Jungle the term civil society has remained both vital and controversial. Almost every introduction to an academic work on the subject, in the last few years, suggests that civil society is a loose concept that nevertheless has become enormously

significant in social sciences. The resurrection of civil society by scholars and activists (Diamond, 1994) in the last twenty years means that the notion of civil society is 'now central to the majority of accounts of democracy and democratisation' (Baker, 1998b: 81).

Civil society is broadly defined as the 'arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values [which] commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power' (CCS, LSE).¹ This 'increasingly ambiguous' term (Cohen and Arato, 1997) is identified with everything from multiparty systems and the rights of citizenship to individual voluntarism and the spirit of community' (Seligman, 1997: 5). Although civil society is understood in many different ways, it has been argued that there is an 'associational revolution at work' today (Edwards 2005: 21) and that the counter-balancing power of civil society vis-à-vis the state is seen as the 'way of minimising the role of the state in society, both a mechanism for restraining state power and as a substitute for many of the functions of the state' (Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor, 2001: 11). A

civil society that is autonomous is, therefore, seen as 'a necessary bulwark against undemocratic state power' which might express 'the radicalisation of democracy and redistribution of political power' (Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor, 2001: 11). Particularly in Eastern Europe and Latin America, civil society has been seen as 'active citizenship, growing self-organisation outside formal political circles, and expanded space in which individual citizens can influence the conditions in which they live both directly through self-organisation and through pressure on the state' (Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor, 2001: 11). To Scholte (2004: 214) 'civil society groups bring citizens together non-coercively in deliberate attempts to mould the formal laws and informal norms that regulate social interaction' (see also Walzer, 1998).

While it is widely recognised that the boundaries between the state and civil society are often complex, blurred and negotiated (CCS, LSE), liberal theories of civil society rely on the separation – complementarity between civil society and the state. To Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci, however, that separation was itself a construct of the political discourse of liberal democracy. Civil society is not the 'autonomous sphere of voluntary [uncoerced] association' but 'is constituted by class power, market relations and the commodity form, as any other sphere of capitalist society' (Ehrenberg, 1999: 210). Civil society has the crucial role in the legitimisation of capitalist hegemony (Ehrenberg, 1999:208), where 'hegemony' is understood not only in terms of economic and political control by the dominant class but the ability of this class to impose its own views of the world on the subordinate groups thus becoming the view of society as a whole. This 'naturalisation of capitalism' could not be simply sustained by the coercion of the state although this has an important role to play. Hegemony 'presupposed a certain measure of consent, incorporation, and collaboration. Institutions such as family, property relations, and law interacted with the informal norms that governed marriage, work and free time to produce a bourgeois civil society that organised a significant degree of consensus' (Ehrenberg, 1999: 209).

Baker (1998a: 396) argues for a revitalisation of Gramsci's thought in Latin America, where 'the failure of state-centric strategies made the idea of civil society as a separate, political, sphere (...) singularly attractive...it provided the left with a new arena for contestation based upon agents and methods of change radically different from those that had been privileged before...The recognition of the need for a more democratic and "secularised" socialism, and the severe limits placed upon any directly confrontational tactics by the ubiquitous military apparatuses, turned Gramsci's strategy of counter-hegemony into just about the only viable alternative.'

In Latin America, the dismantling and/or retreat of the state from key areas of development during the neoliberal period combined with the historical force of grassroots resistance have transformed 'civil society' in what Held (1995:10-11) describes as 'the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalisation of the world economy can mount their protests and seek alternatives.'

Autonomy – defined as self-determination, organisational self-management and social, political and economic independence from the state and the market – has allowed social movements to reinvent social practices. Novel ways of framing political and social issues, mobilising distinct constituencies and participating in politics opened a space for theorising civil society and its relationship with the state in novel ways. This is particularly the case when social movements embrace the kind of autonomy that rejects the possibility of being part of new institutional designs which encourage local participation and empowerment, and put their efforts instead on creating *alternative* (revolutionary?) economic, cultural, social and/or political relations.

In this paper I argue that autonomous practices by social movements allow a critique of dominant notions of civil society, defined as a sphere established apart from, regulated via or complementary to the state. The praxis of substantive autonomy emerges and negates the divider between social,

economic and political spheres typical of liberal societies. Through autonomy – a category of struggle, civil society ceases to be only the site where the legitimisation of capitalist hegemony occurs to become a *territorial and symbolic space* where the contention between hegemonic and counter hegemonic practices takes place.

These ideas are discussed through a paradigmatic case study of the autonomous projects and practices of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. I show that to the Zapatistas, the term civil society is inextricably interlocked with the practice of radical democracy and autonomy and it is described as 'the sphere of autonomously organised society, in opposition to that established by the state or directly controlled by it or associated to it' (Esteva, 1999). I explore the processes through which the Zapatistas challenge state power by practicing radical democracy. I suggest that despite its significance the Zapatistas' critique of the liberal concept of civil society has been overlooked. The paper points at the lessons the Zapatista experience of self-government presents for the re-configuration of the concept of civil society in political sociology and political science.

The paper is based on data from the author's research project 'Social movements and the project of autonomy in Latin America' (2005-2008) (RES-155-25-0007) funded by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under the 'Non-Governmental Public Action' programme, centre for Civil Society, LSE. The project compared four social movements from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Mexico. The overall research focused on organisational autonomy, autonomous practices, and on their social and institutional impact. The case study of the Zapatistas focused on the Snail Oventic and consisted of individual in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations.²

The paper is organised in two sections. In section I, describe the nature and significance of the autonomous practices of the Zapatistas. This is done by

looking at (1) their political bodies (Snails and GGC), (2) their community projects (education, health and work cooperatives), and (3) the state's strategies of countering the project of the Zapatista movement. In section II, I discuss the Zapatistas' practical critique of civil society and conclude with some observations on the potential theoretical impact of this critique for a Eurocentric liberal conceptualisation of civil society.

I. The Zapatistas praxis: radical democracy and the struggle for autonomy

1. Background

On January 1st, 1994, the day that the Mexican state was entering the NAFTA treaty, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN), an insurrectionary group of indigenous Mexicans, peacefully occupied the councils of Huixtán, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Altamirano, Ocosingo, Las Margaritas, Oxchuc and Chanal in the Chiapas Region of Mexico. Claiming 'Enough is enough!' (*¡Ya Basta!*), the Zapatistas' uprising made visible the existence of deep contradictions within Mexico, between the potential wealth of the area (e.g. biodiversity, energy, oil, water falls) and the poverty of those who occupied it (Ceceña and Barreda 1998; Pickard 2004).³ They rejected the NAFTA treaty on the grounds that indigenous lands (*ejidos*) were going to be taken back and opened up for large agro-business, and extended their critique to neoliberal globalisation.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the multidimensional significance of the Zapatistas' uprising. Suffice is to say that the Zapatistas have become a symbol for those struggling for dignity and new forms of democracy worldwide. The Zapatistas challenged extant revolutionary traditions (e.g. Marxist and socialist) concerned with class, exploitation and power, by arguing that human dignity should be the fundamental value for a revolutionary movement. Dignity for the Zapatistas is not defined in abstraction from self-determination, but based on the idea that 'one is somebody simply to the extent he or she is involved in the human endeavour, in actively claiming one's place within a human community, in reclaiming direct links with other human beings' (De Angelis, 2000: 27). This revolution based on dignity, which has no intention to seize state power but to radicalise the democratic process and to construct counter power. The two principles governing the Zapatistas

praxis are 'Asking we walk' (there is not an definitive plan to follow but just questions to answer as they go) and 'command while obeying' (there are not established hierarchies but horizontality and radical democracy). During the formative years, the EZLN and the Zapatistas communities were both constituted. Up to until 2003 there were five Zapatista regions (*Aguascalientes*) in Chiapas. **Map: source: CIEPAC 1998.** These were spaces where the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee (*Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena* (CCIR) operated. Although the weapons were never there to be used (Muñoz, 2004), the army was



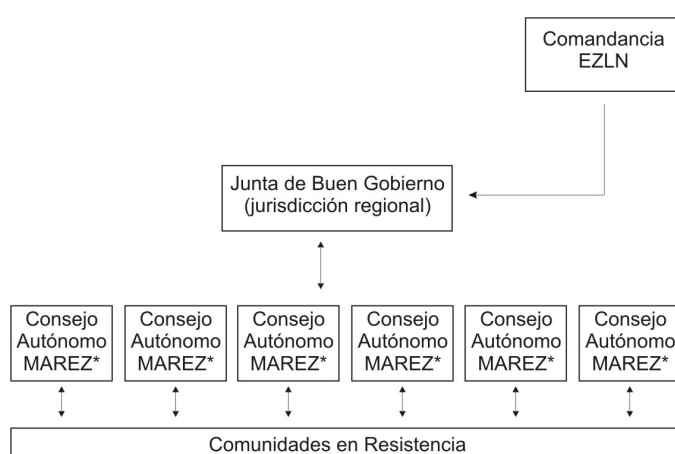
progressively adopting an even more defensive role subordinated to the civil organisation. In 2003, the EZLN changed its strategy: a process of demilitarisation of the movement towards the strengthening of civil society begun, thus opening the space for the discussion and development of autonomy. The Snails and GGC explored in this paper were then created in order to re organise the occupied territories in 2003. By 2007 there were 38 Autonomous Rebel Zapatistas Councils (*Municipalidades Autónomas Rebeldes Zapatistas*, MAREZ). These self-organised and governed physical and political spaces cover almost 40% of the Chiapas state, i.e. 30,000 km², involving 1.100 communities of 300/400 inhabitants each (Ouviña, 2007)

2. 'Free' and 'Autonomous' don't mean the same

The creation of the GGC was a response to the governmental strategy of 're municipalisation' (*re municipalización*) of the region. The San Andres Agreements of 1996 included a constitutional recognition of the indigenous people's rights and guaranteed self-governed social organisations, self-government and collective production (Ouviña, 2007). Despite mobilisation and negotiations between the EZLN and the state, the agreements were not put into practice under Zedillo.

When the Agreements were put into practice, it became clear that what the government was proposing was not what the Zapatistas expected. In other words, the law made clear that the only political, social and cultural form of organisation and self-government was the *free municipality* (Burguete and Mayor, 2004). It identified what kind of indigenous authorities were recognised by law and how they should be elected – by free and secret ballot (Burguete, 2004). The reform made any other form of organisation illegal. The Zapatistas rejected the Agreement, learnt from this experience and, after four years of silence, re-emerged and responded with the creation of *autonomous municipalities*, and new forms of self-government' (CS, 2005: 20).

3. The political bodies of radical democracy: Snails and the Good Government Councils



*MAREZ Treinta Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas, distribuidos en cinco "Caracoles Rebeldes". Cada "Caracol" cuenta con una Junta de Buen Gobierno.
<-----> Indica relaciones jerárquicas, pero al mismo de regulación, en tanto existe el mecanismo de revocación de mandato y se presume que la relación no es vertical, sino de "mandar obedeciendo".

Chart Source: Burguete 2005

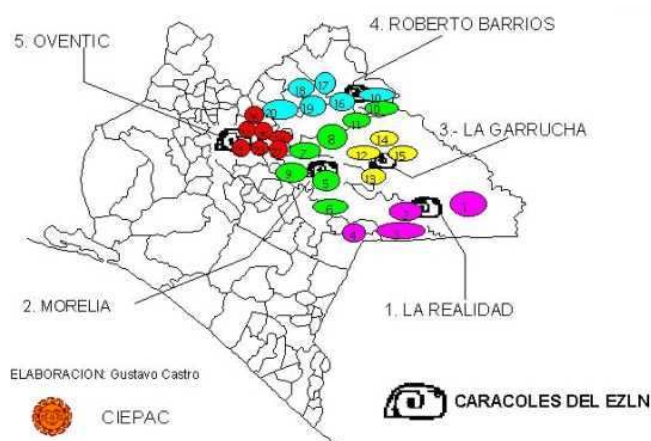
The 38 MAREZ that constitute the Zapatista realm are organised in five Snails (*Caracoles*) each of which has a Good Government Council (GGC). Decision making occurs at three distinguishable levels.⁴ (i) At the local level:

each community of every town elects its authorities, that is the communal agent (*Agente communal*). Each community also elects representatives to the Autonomous Councils (*Consejos Autónomos*), the decision making body. All posts are voluntary. (ii) At municipal level: delegates of each villa meet in assemblies which can last for 3 days, to reach consensus about decision involving design and execution of community projects. Representatives to the Good Government Councils and the permanent representatives to the five Snails

are elected. (iii) The State (*estadal*) level comprises five Snails: Oventic, Roberto Barrios, Morelia, La Realidad and La Garrucha. These spaces are also cultural spaces, gathering schools, assembly rooms, sport and rest zones, health centres, and cooperatives. The GGC works within the Snails. Two representatives per each autonomous council participate in the regional GGC. The GGC administrates justice, mediates conflicts between autonomous councils and government councils, issues identity cards, discusses goals related to welfare provision (health, education, various projects) promotes and supervise projects and community programmes; denounces violations to human rights, guarantees bi-cultural education and health.

The GGC of the Oventic Snail, for example, has 23 members who hold monthly meetings plus *ad hoc* meetings. (Interview with members of the GGC Oventic, August 2008). All representatives remain in their posts for a brief period of time to avoid bureaucratisation and the formation of a technocrats and to practice horizontal, radical democracy (Almeyra, 2006). The GGC suggests a course of

action which is discussed by the communities. The GGC is also the voice of the Snail before national and international civil society, hosts visitors, administrates resources, reception of issues from MAREZ. Within the GGC there are no division of powers. **Map**



Source: Gustavo Castro, CIEPAC.

More than a system of representation, democracy is a lifestyle (Almeyra, 2005).

The implementation of the principle of 'command while obeying' requires a process of consultation that constantly moves forward and backwards. The Snail and its spiral shell represent this. The Zapatistas revolution 'spirals outward and backward, away from some of the colossal mistakes of

capitalism's savage alienation, industrialism's regimentation, and toward old ways and small things; it also spirals inward via new words and new thoughts...They travel both ways on their spiral' (Solnit, 2008). It guides everyday decision-making processes and requires time (maybe weeks or months) which is incomprehensible within the Eurocentric logic (Holloway, Matamorros and Tischler, 2008).

4. Autonomy *de facto* (policy as a tool for insurgence and counter hegemony)

The Zapatista struggle for autonomy rejects an autonomy that is integrated into institutional designs which embrace empowerment and participation in policy making processes. Rather, they deliver autonomously what can be called policy from below in many key areas of welfare.

The practice of substantive autonomy (Esteva, 2009) leads to a conflict between legal and legitimate. To them, the constitutional legality represents illegitimacy. The GGC and Autonomous Councils are legitimate but illegal. The Zapatistas aim to construct a new legitimacy based on their own understanding of the law, which at the moment is incompatible with the Mexican state's understanding of legal and legitimate (CS, 2005: 87)

Education is central to the Zapatista's revolutionary venture. Nearly 40 percent (38.8%) of the indigenous population has no access to education. The formation of cadres (promoters) and the creation of secondary and primary autonomous rebel schools was a response to the neglect by the 'bad government'. In addition to making Castilian (Spanish) and Tzotzil accessible to the indigenous population, particularly women autonomous rebel education facilitates that young people acquire knowledge and also acknowledge their background, history, and customs. Education serves the purposes of conscientisation of the political goals of *Zapatismo*. The main problems are (i) is how to fund the system, which is highly dependent on international solidarity

(ii) lack of official recognition of Zapatista education and subsequent discrimination.

Each Snail has also an organised health system in coordination with the other four. In Oventic, the *La Guadalupe* clinic (1990) facilitates access to health and preventive medicine. Paradoxically, despite 54% of hydroelectric energy coming from Grijalva River, Chiapas communities have no electricity or sewage systems. In 2000, poverty affected 76% of the population (Pickard, 2004). In rural areas, 85% of the EAP lives in extreme poverty and 71% of the population live in unhealthy and poorly constructed housing. Malnourishment is the third highest in the country, affecting 71.6% of the population. Death from curable diseases, such as diarrhoea, among children amount to 34.8 per 1,000 children. Health promoters work with patients as well as with the communities, improving hygiene and raising awareness about disease prevention. The Zapatistas' health system aims to recover and socialise ancient medical practices, herbs and massages. There are three main problems: training (need for volunteers, dependence on charity), financial (medicines, technology) and cultural (difficulties to promote reproductive health, family planning).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the Agrarian Revolutionary Law, which proposes the redistribution of land and the creation of production cooperatives, aimed at recovering a form of community production that put the collective interest before individual needs. The law limits ownership of the land to up to 100 hectares of bad land and up to 50 hectares of good land. Since August 2005, the Zapatistas' communities have formed co-operatives for the production, commercialisation and fair trade of their products (for example coffee) which are advertised on the internet. The internal market and domestic consumption are priorities and the organisation of these cooperatives implies learning process through which the communities recognise their capacity to produce and sell their products autonomously avoiding intermediators (*coyotes*). Not only does the community obtain a fair price for their products but also looks after the environment,

contributes to regional development and generates resources to be used in other community projects.

5. The state and 'democratic planning' (Policy as a tool for counter insurgency and hegemony)

Over the fifteen years, the Zapatistas' uprising and further exercise of radical democracy and autonomy *de facto* provoke a series of responses from the Chiapas and the national states, ranging from military and paramilitary intervention to policy. The demilitarisation of the movement and the change of strategy that put democracy and autonomy at the centre of the Zapatistas' political debates influenced governmental attitudes towards the movement. Although the low intensity war, repression and military surveillance of the Chiapas region remains in place, a series of (counterinsurgent) policies were launched and implemented between 2006 and 2008. Three are relevant to our discussion. The creation of the Chiapas Solidarity Institute (*Instituto Chiapas Solidario*, ICS) in 2007 aims at organising 'civil society' through the state 'democratic planning'. With regional and municipal delegates and a large budget, the ICS members see themselves as 'an army which supports society' (Interview ICS, August 2008). The explicit idea behind the creation of the ICS is to open institutional channels for participation to solve the crisis of democratic representation in Chiapas. Indigenous communities are being organised in neighbourhood assemblies which are to deliver and identify needs, demands and priorities, which are passed on to a series of committees for Regional Development.

Also in 2007, the programme *Sustainable Rural Cities* was launched to fight against 'exclusion via dispersion': In Chiapas, 15,000 out of 24,000 localities have less than 100 inhabitants distributed in 8,000 households, generally enjoying few or no basic services. The programme will relocate and reorganise the population in eight new cities to maximise service provision. To the

Zapatistas, the plan matches the World Bank programme Puebla-Panamá, and entails a territorial reorganisation where the reallocation of the population will strategically vacate land for commercial, tourist and natural resources exploitation by private investors (CIEPAC, August 2008). Finally, since the creation of the five Snails, the Chiapas state has increased its budget and implemented policy that aims at responding to community needs in terms of social development. New schools and health centres are being created and widely advertised under the slogan 'Facts, not words', close to the where autonomous services are provided by the Zapatistas. State policies are.

II. Discussion: the Zapatistas' critique and our understanding of it

In this paper I argue that autonomous practices by social movements may allow a critique of dominant notions of civil society defined as a sphere established apart from, regulated via or complementary to the state. In this critique, autonomy becomes a 'category of struggle' which emerges from and negates the separations between social, economic and political spheres typical of liberal societies. Through autonomy, civil society ceases to be only the site where the legitimisation of hegemonic social relations occurs to become a territorial and symbolic *space* where the contention between hegemonic and counter hegemonic practices takes place. These ideas were discussed through a paradigmatic case study of autonomous practices by the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. I showed that to the Zapatistas, civil society is inextricably interlocked with the practice of radical democracy and substantive autonomy. Civil society is defined as 'the sphere of autonomously organised society, in opposition to that established by the state or directly controlled by it or associated to it' (Esteva, 1999). I explored the Zapatistas two-dimensional struggle to reject state power and with it the separation between civil society and the state, and practice of radical democracy and the re-totalisation of the social field. I also discussed the state policy as a tool for counterinsurgency. In what follows I discuss radical democracy as opposed to abstract democracy and the link between the Zapatistas' notions of radical democracy, counter power, autonomy, and *civil society*. Finally, I make some observations about both the broader lessons the Zapatista experience of self-government presents for the re-configuration of notions of civil society in political sociology and political science, and our limits to grasp the implication of the Zapatistas' critique.

1. Political project: Counter power

The meaning that the Zapatistas give to their action directed to 'change the world' through 'simple demands' of justice, dignity and democracy (Ponce de León, 2001) is quite different from those revolutionary proposals of the traditional left. *Zapatismo* 'does not fit into any previously established moulds of what revolution should be' (Holloway and Peláez, 1998). The core of the newness of *Zapatismo* is the project of changing the world without taking power: 'We want to change the world, but not by taking power, not to conquer the world, but to make it anew' (Holloway, 2002b). This does not mean simply, as suggested by Cohen and Arato (1997), that the Zapatistas' is a 'self-limiting revolution' which shows a 'self-understanding that abandons revolutionary dreams in favour of radical reform that is not necessarily and primarily oriented to the state' (cited in Barker, 1997: 493). Their revolution is indeed not oriented to the state, but it is driven by the will to achieve self-realisation, to recover the human capacity to work and create in solidarity with the intention of satisfying essential needs, to recovering the future. The attainment of self-determination, solidarity and self-realisation are incompatible with the logic of state power and money. The Zapatistas' notion of power is that of counter-power.

2. Radical democracy: rejecting abstract democracy

The Zapatistas exercise of radical democracy reject *abstract* democracy, i.e. a democracy whose subject 'is not a human person, "man" in all the richness of his needs, interests and beliefs' but 'the Cartesian subject in all its abstractions, the empty punctuality we reach after subtracting all its particular contents' (Žižek, 2000: 163). Žižek (2000: 163) suggests, with regards to 'the preamble of every democratic proclamation "all people *without regard to* (race, sex, religion, wealth, social status)"' that there is a 'violent act of abstraction at work in this "without regard to"'. It is, he argues, 'an abstraction of all positive features, a dissolution of all substantial, innate, links ... There is in the very notion of democracy no place for the fullness of concrete human content, for

the genuineness of community links: democracy *is* a formal link of abstract individuals.'

By rejecting the political abstraction and the violence of homogenisation implicit in the general category of citizen, the Zapatistas' democracy defined as 'people's democracy' or 'democracy in its most essential form' (Esteva, 1999: 155). This notion of democracy distances itself from formal or representative democracy in that 'it does not allude to a kind of government but to a government end. It is not a collection of institutions but a historical project. With the word democracy people are not alluding to present democracies ... but to people's power' (Esteva, 1999: 155). In radical democracy, the idea of individuals who delegate power is rejected on behalf of women and men governing themselves. The abstract category of individuals reduce their condition 'to an atom of a bracket defined and controlled by others, and treated accordingly, in the terms prescribed for the mass of individuals constituting every abstract category: passengers on a flight, social security members...' (Enzensberg, 1976: 10 cited in Esteva 1999: 156)

The rejection of formal 'citizenship' entails a rejection of the fundamental separations between the political, the economic and social on which capitalist societies are based, and that underpins a definition of democracy in abstract terms. Instead, 'radical democracy envisions the people gathered in the public space, with neither the great paternal Leviathan nor the great maternal society standing over them, but only the empty sky – the people making the power of the Leviathan their own again, free to speak, to choose, to act' (Lummis cited by Esteva, 1999: 155).

The Zapatistas' definition of civil society is deeply connected to radical democracy and autonomy. The Zapatistas 'civil society' is a social space for the realisation of human needs through autonomy and democracy 'able to *put in practice* by activating the power that already has' (Esteva, 1999) those values such as justice and dignity. That makes those spaces also spaces for the deployment of counter hegemonic practices. Civil society 'as the sphere of autonomously organised

society, in opposition to that established by the state or directly controlled by it or associated to it (Esteva, 1999).

3. Acquiescence or Rebellion? The dilemma of Autonomy

The fundamental difference between the liberal concept of autonomous civil society and the Zapatistas' lie in that whereas the former can fit well into institutional designs that celebrate 'empowerment', 'participation from below' and 'autonomy', the latter does not. The Zapatistas reject state power and therefore the complementarity between civil society and the state. Civil society would not counterweights [or substitute] the power of the state but 'makes it superfluous' (see Esteva, 1999). This has been argued to be both dangerous and desirable-but-insufficient. To those taking up mainstream notions of civil society for a conceptualisation of democracy, civil society has the crucial role of both restricting state power and of legitimising the state through various forms of consent as well as dissent (Diamond, 1994: 14). They warn us of the dangers of too much autonomy, as an alienated civil society from the state, and this can create a major tension in democratic development and of the need for limits on autonomy (Diamond, 1994) Those sympathetic to *Zapatismo* consider their autonomy as a attractive goal, but point at its dilemmas, i.e. how much 'administrative decentralisation' would 'alter existing political hierarchies or the role of the state as broker for global capital'? If 'autonomy is conceived as mere disengagement, would leave autonomous communities cut off from resources and unprotected from the forces of the global market'? (Stahler-Sholk, 2007: 48).

The question about whether civil society community action is functional to or challenges new forms of the relationship between civil society and the state requires an understanding of this action as neither completely subordinated to the logics of the state nor completely autonomous. Since total subordination to the state or absolute autonomy from the state are both possible and impossible, it is rather the contested relationship between movements and the state what facilitates the production of counter hegemonic practices.

As argued elsewhere, autonomy is an (im)possible task insofar as 'autonomous social movements are always embedded in specific social, economic, cultural and political relations that one cannot simply escape' (Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer 2009; 2010). But, for this reason, autonomy entails the possibility of counter hegemony *from within*. Autonomy creates a 'fissure' within an incomplete hegemony, which bears a fundamental antagonism within it which cannot be permanently resolved but which is dealt with as the Zapatistas 'walk' (*asking we walk*): the antagonism between opening up frontiers of resistance and change towards a new world(s) and the incorporation of their project into state programs which also advocate economic, social, cultural and political change' (Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer, 2009; 2010). Autonomous praxis are counter hegemonic *per se* in that they contribute to the destabilisation of 'taken-for-granted meanings' (Bebbington, 2007: 806), widen the universe of what is politically thinkable and show that narratives and discourses politically reversible (Cornwall and Brock, 2005)

4. Grasping the Zapatistas' critique

My argument now will be that the Zapatistas' notion of civil society is not an 'actualization of the classic term', but, as Esteva (1999) suggests, 'alludes to a mutation in the political body' and that this mutation has been overlooked due to theoretical limitations. The recognition that what 'we' usually understand by 'civil society' is a Eurocentric rather than universal way, based on the separation of spheres which leads to a particular form of democratisation and a specific role for 'civil society' actors (Baker, 1998) is necessary but not sufficient. The Zapatistas' critique cannot be grasp without denaturalising the notion of 'civil society' and, with it, the very separation between civil society and the state that are at the centre of modern European social thinking (Lively and Reeve, 1997) and which made civil society such a 'powerful concept' (Colas, 2002: 26). In the notion of civil society, the power of critique exists in a form of 'being denied' The elaboration of an emancipatory reflection (Žižek, 2002: 170) seems vital to allow us to, paraphrasing Žižek (2000) 'look awry', that is, to come out of the 'cul-the-

sac of debilitating impossibility' and find ways to 'question the hegemonic ideological co-ordinates' (Žižek, 2002: 170).

Emancipatory theory calls for the use of 'categories able to conceptualise the "openness of society"' (Holloway, 1993: 76), able to be critical of the preconditions for the existence of the theory itself (Bonefeld *et al* 1995: 3). The implications of this is that it facilitates a change of focus from 'civil society' to the processes of struggle that produced and naturalised this *category*. The critique then rejects 'the horizons of a given world' of formal abstractions and tries to grasp the real movement that produced it. The critique 'involves a reciprocal interrelation between the categories of theory (which interrogate practice) and the categories of practice (which constitute the framework for critique)' (Bonefeld *et al* 1995: xi). Where do we position ourselves in this process? Holloway claims that we should not transform *Zapatismo* into an *object* of the social sciences, but see it as 'the *subject* of an attack on the mainstream development of the social sciences. To treat *Zapatismo* as an *object* of social scientific inquiry' – he claims - 'would be to do violence to the Zapatistas, to refuse to listen to them, to force them into categories that they are challenging, to impose upon them the disillusionment that they are rebelling against. In other words, 'the Zapatistas *are not a "they" but a "we"*' (Holloway 2002b: 156, his italics).

Autonomous practices by social movements may -as I have showed in this paper, allow a critique of dominant notions of civil society, defined as a sphere established apart from, regulated via or complementary to the state. The Zapatistas' praxis of substantive autonomy emerges from and simultaneously negates the divider between social, economic and political spheres typical of liberal societies. Through autonomy – a category of struggle, civil society ceases to be only the site where the legitimisation of capitalist hegemony occurs to become a *territorial and symbolic space* where not only the contention between hegemonic and counter hegemonic practices takes place, but from where it is (im)possible to think of the unthinkable.

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¹ http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm, accessed 16.1.09

² Interviewees: Senior staff at the Departments of Social Programmes and Social Development (Chiapas) and members of the Good Government Council of the Oventic Snail, Chiapas; health and secondary education coordinators from the Zapatista movement, and members of the executive of two main institutes: CIEPAC (Centre for the study of economic and political communitarian action) and the Chiapas Solidarity Institute (*Instituto Chiapas Solidario*). Focus groups/collective interviews

were conducted with three Women Cooperatives in Oventic (Xulum Chon, Sancris *Mujeres en Rebeldía*; Nichim Rosa. All interviews were done during August 2008.

³ Historically, the Chiapas region was recognised for its vast natural resources, and has become an strategic area for oil, electricity, biodiversity). Also historically, the indigenous population was used as cheap or slave labour on plantations and farms to produce food for a local, national and international market. Communities maintained a strong identity and in some ways autonomy in practicing their traditions and values but the quality of life was very poor and has become unsustainable.

⁴ Levels do not indicate hierarchy but levels of organisation.